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AUTHOR Burke, Janet
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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted to investigate the extent to which a semester course in developmental psychology influenced the attitudes that single, young adults had toward parenthood, children, and the inevitability of pregnancy. Subjects were 33 students enrolled in an introductory level course in child psychology at a large university near Boston. All were single adults under 21 years of age. The primary method of instruction was lecture complemented by a textbook and supplementary reading. To assess attitudes, at the beginning and end of the semester each subject responded to The Attitudes Towards Procreation Scale, a 16-item Likert-type measure that assesses attitudes towards procreation as the subject perceives them for himself or herself and for people in general. Each subject responded to two open-ended questions at the end of the semester: (1) "Have your attitudes toward children changed during the course of the semester? If so, how?" and (2) "Have your attitudes towards having children changed during the course of the semester? If so, how?" Results suggested that a typical, academically oriented course in child psychology may not be the most efficient vehicle for influencing young adults about parenthood and children. (The scale is appended.) (RH)

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# THE INEVITABILITY OF PREGNANCY: EDUCATION FOR ATTITUDE CHANGE

Dr. Janet Burke
Psychology Department
University of Lowell
Lowell, MA 01854

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# The Inevitability of Pregnancy: Education for Attitude Change


## Abstract

A 16 item Likert type scale, and two open ended questions designed to measure attitudes towards parenthood, children, and the inevitability of pregnancy were administered to 33 students (14 males & 19 females) at the beginning and end of a one semester college level course in Developmental Psychology; in an effort to determine whether students' attitudes would change as a result of taking the course. The study found no significant differences in pre and post test response means. Implicaitons and suggestions for future research are discussed.


## Introduction

Much has been written in both lay and professional literature about shifting attitudes towards parenthood, and the impact that these attitude changes may have not only on the culture as a whole, but on the lives of specific individuals. The last forty years alone have witnessed many changes, including; the large family, the small family, zero pupulation growth, single parent families, delayed family growth (as a result of the women's movement), and even couples who vocally announce that they have no intention of ever having a family.

The status and future of the American family has even

evoked concern at such high political levels as the U.S. Congress and the American Presidency. Politicians and independent citizen's groups argue bitterly over issues of funding for programs dealing with the family, such as, aid to dependent children, abortion, family planning agencies, educational and mass media programs which attempt to produce behavioral and attitudinal change in the areas of family planning, parenthood and children.

Educators are acutely aware of these changes in the American family, and the issues surrounding them. The reality of declining enrollments, and its accompanying specualtion about the future make this an area of vital concern to all educators. Thus it becomes increasingly important to attempt to understand the means by which our attitudes towards children and parenthood are shaped and changed.

Background

Most Developmental Psychologists would probably agree with McBride (1973) that people have children for a variety of reasons both conscious and unconscious, and that "parents never have children just because they love children and want some of their very own". In Pronatalism: The Myth of Mom and Apple Pie, Peck and Sanderowitz (1974) focus on popular culturalattitudes which encourage reproduction and the role of parenthood. Yet we know very little about how these

attitudes develop and spread in the popular culture. As Rollins (1970) points out in Motherhood: Need or Myth?, mothers often experience unexpected negative feelings such as: loss of identity, weariness, resentment, and feelings of being trapped or conned. Those feelings clearly do not contribute to the type of environment in which young children can develop positively. Today's young adults are among the first to have effective methods of birth control available to them. Perry and Perry (1977) believe that many are deferring parenthood and deciding agianst it. Perry and Perry feel that more and more young people are making rational rather than traditional or emotional decisions to have children. One can only hope that Perry and Perry are correct and that those who choose to become parents will not succomb to the dilema of Ann Landers' subjects who reported that if they had their lives to live over again, they would not have children. (Guss and Coleman: 1976) Guss and Coleman however, found that 95% of their subjects would have children again. The first hand educational experience that Ann Landers' subjects received was a high price to pay for the knowledge that they received, and of course gained too late to be of any benefit to them personally.

A general goal of education is to help each new generation learn from those who have gone before. Society cannot afford to continue reinventing the wheel. The study of Developmental Psychology in particular should help the student learn about

options in his own life. University level courses in the area of Developmental Psychology typically have as their objectives the development of an awareness of the factors contributing to an individual's decisions to have children; and a realistic appraisal of what children are like, and what it means to be a parent. It is important to try to understand to what extent the university is being successful in achieving these objectives, and thus contributing towards a more rational and informed decision making process regarding parenthood.

Purpose

The purpose of this research is to investigate the extent to which a one semester course in Developmental Psychology influences the attitudes that single young adults have toward: (1) parenthood; (2) children; (3) the inevitability of pregnancy. The specific purpose of this study is to test three hypotheses which deal with the question of whether students enrolled in a course in Developmental Psychology will report different attitudes towards parenthood, children, and the inevitability of pregnancy at the end of the course than those which they reported at the beginning of the course.

Methodology

The subjects were 33 students (primarily freshmen and sophomores) enrolled in an introductory level course in Child Psychology at a large university near Boston. The subjects were all single young adults under age 21. There

were 14 males and 19 females. The course was a three credit one semester introduciton to the field of Child Psychology. Most of the students had taken an introductory level Psychology course in a previous semester. However the Child Psychology course had no prerequisites. The primary method of instruction was lecture complimented by a major introductory level textbook (Stone & Church) and a supplementary reading (Fraiberg's The Magic Years).

The S's attitudes were assessed in two ways. Firstly, each S responded to "The Attitudes Towards Procreation Scale" at the beginning of the semester and again at the end of the semester. "The Attitudes Towards Procreation Scale" is a 16 item Likert Type Scale which assesses attitudes towards procreation as the subject percieves them for himself and for people in general. A copy of this instrument is attached in Appendix A. Items # 1,6,7,10,2,3,13 relate to attitudes towards parenthood as a dimension of attitudes towards procreation. Similarly items # 14,7,6,13 relate to attitudes towrds children as a dimension of attitudes towards procreation. Items # 4,5,8,11,12 relate to attitudes towards the inevitability of pregnancy as a dimesnion of attitudes towards procreation. Thus 4 pre-semester and 4 post-semester scores are obtained for each S's perceptions of his own attitudes. Since the subject also responds to each item in terms of how he thinks other people feel the results also yield 4 pre-semester and 4 post-semester scores for the S's

perception of other people's attitudes. The second method used to assess the S's attitudes was to have each S respond to the following two open ended questions at the end of the semester: (1) Have your attitudes towards children changed during the course of the semester? If so, How?; (2) Have your attitudes towards having childrne changed during the course of the semester? If so, How? Ss remained anonymous. However the researcher was able to match a subject's response from the beginning of the semester with those given at the end of the semester by means of ficticious names which the Ss chose and wrote on their papers, (i.e. mickeymouse, superman).

This research seeks to determine whether S's attitudes (as measured by the two above described methods) towards parenthood, children and the inevitability of pregnancy change during the course of the semester. Stated specifically:

$H_1$ Is there any difference in students' attitudes towards parenthood prior to enrolling in a course in Developmental Psychology, and after completing a course in Developmental Psychology?

$H_2$ Is there any difference in students' attitudes towards children prior to enrolling in a course in Developmental Psychology and after completing a course in Developmental Psychology?

$H_3$ Is there any difference in students' attitudes towards the inevitability of pregnancy prior to enrolling in a course in Developmental Psychology and after completing a course in Developmental Psychology?

Results

Table I shows the mean responses for pre-semester and post-semester scores for the total 16 items as well as the three subscales of parenthood, children, and inevitability. The data is grouped by sex as well as totally. There is little difference between pre and post data means. The data was analyzed for significant differences by means of a t test. No significant differences were found.

Talbe II shows S's responses to the two open ended questions. While it may appear from looking tha the table that 7 Ss felt that their attitudes toward having children themselves (parenthood) had cahnged; adn that 20 Ss felt that their attitudes towards children had changed, in fact this is not actually the case. The Ss not only responded "yes" or "no" to these questions, but also were asked to report how their attidudes had changed. Therefor, although 20 Ss responded "yes" to the question of whether their attitudes towards children had changed, when the rest of their responses were read, it became clear that it was not their attitudes that they were referring to, but rather their knowledge of children, For example several subjects made statements to the effect of "I understand children better now, I know more about them". Only one S's statement differed and could be perceived as attitude change because the subject stated that she saw children as more interesting now.

Concerning the question of parenthood Table II shows that 7 Ss reported that their attitudes towards parenthood had changed. Written responses indicated different directions in the change. Two Ss stated that the change was positive because they had met someone and were planning to be married. Three Ss said that they saw parenthood as a much more difficult task tahn they had earlier imagined and planned to delay parenthood. Two Ss reported that they now felt more confident to deal with parenthood now that they had completed the course.

Conclusions

The purpose of this research was to determine whether students' attitudes towards parenthood, children and the inevitability of pregnancy were effected by their completing a one semester course in Child Psychology. Statistical analysis of pre-semester and post-semester scores on a 16 item Likert type scale found no significant differences between the two sets of data. An analysis of students' responses to two open ended questions about their attitudes towards parenthood and children revealed that possibly one student's attitudes towards children were affected positively by the course; and that five students' attitudes towards parenthood had been affected as a result of completing the course. However, of these five students, two felt more positive towards becoming parents themselves, and three felt more cautious about taking on the responsibilities of parenthood.

Thus it seems that a typically academically oriented course in Child Psychology may not be the most efficient vechicle for influencing the minds of young adults about parenthood and children. This may be due to the fact that attitudes in this area are firmly entrenched and a vital aspect of cultural and personal identity, and thus less susceptible to intellectual and cognitive arguements. On the other hand it may be that a course in a different discipline whose typical goals and objectives are different than those of Child Psychology might have more success in the area of attitude change concerning parenthood and children. Courses in Marriage and the family come to mind as likely candidates.

Recommendations

Several possibilities present themselves for future research and investigation. Primarily whether courses of a different nature with a similar sample would be effective; or courses in the Developmental area, but with an older or younger population of subjects whose identity is not quite so fragile. Beyond this educators must determine to what extent the curruculum in higher education can and should be modified to achieve such ends.

Table I
The Attituding Towards Procreation Scale

| | Total Score | | Parenthood | | Children | | Inevitability | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Other | Self | Other | Self | Other | Self | Other | Self |
| Males N=14 | | | | | | | | |
| Pre-semester $\bar{X}$ | 49.86 | 44.36 | 24.07 | 20.64 | 14.93 | 13.29 | 11.64 | 10.71 |
| Post-semester $\bar{X}$ | 50.29 | 44.50 | 23.14 | 22.07 | 14.29 | 13.07 | 12.85 | 10.43 |
| Females N=19 | | | | | | | | |
| Pre-semester $\bar{X}$ | 52.58 | 45.05 | 24.26 | 22.53 | 14.58 | 13.21 | 14.68 | 10.58 |
| Post-semester $\bar{X}$ | 51.43 | 45.53 | 23.53 | 22.63 | 14.26 | 13.05 | 14.53 | 10.47 |
| Total Sample | | | | | | | | |
| Pre-semester $\bar{X}$ | 51.42 | 44.76 | 24.61 | 21.73 | 14.73 | 13.24 | 13.39 | 10.64 |
| Post-semester $\bar{X}$ | 51.00 | 45.09 | 23.36 | 22.39 | 14.27 | 13.06 | 13.82 | 10.45 |

Table II
Responses to Open Ended Questions

| | Children | | Parenthood Having Children | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Yes | No | Yes | No |
| Male N=14 | 10 | 3 | 4 | 9 |
| Female N=19 | 10 | 8 | 3 | 15 |
| Total N=33 | 20 | 11 | 7 | 24 |

*Two Ss 1 male and 1 female failed to respond to these questions

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Appendix A

THE ATTITUDES TOWARS PROCREATION SCALE

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The following statements deal with how adults feel about children. Please respond to each statement twice. The first time answer as you think most Americans would answer. The second time indicate how you personally feel about the statement, by circling the appropriate number as shown below.

| Strongly Agree | Agree | No Opinion | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |

Remember that the statements are about most people and most children. Obviously there are exceptions.

| | How Others Feel | How you Feel |
|---|---|---|
| 1. Births are carefully planned by parents. | 5 4 3 2 1 | 5 4 3 2 1 |
| 2. Parents have children because everyone else does. | 5 4 3 2 1 | 5 4 3 2 1 |
| 3. Parents have children to please others (husband, wife, mother etc.). | 5 4 3 2 1 | 5 4 3 2 1 |
| 4. Parents have children because they are ignorant of birth control. | 5 4 3 2 1 | 5 4 3 2 1 |
| 5. Parents have children because they have no access to birth control. | 5 4 3 2 1 | 5 4 3 2 1 |
| 6. Parents have children to pass on the joy of life. | 5 4 3 2 1 | 5 4 3 2 1 |
| 7. Parents have children because they enjoy children. | 5 4 3 2 1 | 5 4 3 2 1 |
| 8. Pregnancies are accidents which are inevitable. | 5 4 3 2 1 | 5 4 3 2 1 |
| 9. Parents think that children will be security for their old age. | 5 4 3 2 1 | 5 4 3 2 1 |
| 10. Parenthood is the most rewarding of life's experiences. | 5 4 3 2 1 | 5 4 3 2 1 |
| 11. Women must have children in order to be fullfilled. | 5 4 3 2 1 | 5 4 3 2 1 |
| 12. Men must have children in order to be fullfilled. | 5 4 3 2 1 | 5 4 3 2 1 |
| 13. Most people would be better off if they never had children. | 5 4 3 2 1 | 5 4 3 2 1 |
| 14. Children are a source of security for their parents' old age. | 5 4 3 2 1 | 5 4 3 2 1 |
| 15. Religious beliefs influence people's decision to have children. | 5 4 3 2 1 | 5 4 3 2 1 |
| 16. People have children to achieve immortality. | 5 4 3 2 1 | 5 4 3 2 1 |

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